

An illustration of a classroom scene. A teacher with blue hair, wearing a yellow shirt and orange plaid pants, stands on the right, holding a stack of papers and looking exasperated with one hand on her head. Six students are seated at blue desks. One student in the top left is looking up with a surprised expression. Another student in the top center is leaning over their desk. A student in the top right is looking towards the teacher. A student in the center is leaning back in their chair. Two students in the bottom left are seen from behind, sitting at their desks. The background is a solid teal color.

# The Big Class

More kids in your class this year? Real-life strategies for survival, and success, with a large class.  
*By Caralee Adams*

Rachel Santos is constantly reflecting on what does and doesn't work as her class size inches up at Leal Elementary School in Cerritos, California. Last year she had 28 fourth-grade students; this fall she expects 32.

"The beginning is always crazy," says Santos. "You have to simplify and streamline as much as you can."

This means working hard on social skills and procedures, constantly pre-viewing content to keep kids engaged, making sure her voice and authority reach to the back of the classroom—and spreading out the work.

"It's important for everyone to have a job—from passing out papers to heading up the line," says Santos. "If everyone is involved, it's easier to man-

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age your classroom.”

Bigger classes are the reality for more and more teachers across the country. In the 2010–11 school year, 57 percent of districts increased their class sizes, and 65 percent anticipate doing so in 2011–12, according to a December 2010 survey by the American Association of School Administrators. Another poll, in May, by AASA found that 227,000 education jobs are on the chopping block this school year, further pushing up student-to-teacher ratios.

“This highlights how the recession continues at the local level,” says Noelle Ellerson, assistant director of policy, analysis, and advocacy at AASA. “Superintendents are having to make cuts at the direct expense of student services—and against the research on class size.”

So, how do you cope? Experts and veteran teachers like Rachel Santos suggest investing time up front in planning—from lessons to daily routines. Practice classroom procedures and get to know your students to make things run smoothly. Think carefully about the amount of homework you assign. And reach out for help—from enlisting students to do in-class grading to recruiting parent volunteers to collaborating with other teachers.

## Set the Tone

Facing a large classroom can be daunting, but if you stay positive so will the

kids, says Melanie Hobbs, assistant director of the American Federation of Teachers' Educational Issues Department in Washington, D.C. “You set the tone,” she says. “If you are frantic and frazzled, they will be frantic and frazzled.”

Anne Prows, a fifth-grade teacher with 33 students in her Moreno Valley, California, classroom, says teachers in her district accepted a pay cut instead of having class size increase to 40 per room. Still, classes are big, and it's hard not to worry about the impact it's having on students. “You try to put on a brave face and not let it affect you,” she says. “You have to shelve the stress and give 150 percent.”

Teaching science at Ponderosa High School in Parker, Colorado, for the past 27 years, Kathy Dorman has just made the best of classes growing from 22 to 35 students. She's switched her instructional strategy from relying heavily on lecture to having kids work in groups. Although it means more noise overall, it's worked, and students are performing just as well on their AP science tests now as when classes were smaller. The downside: “It affects the relationship you have with the

students. It's hard to develop a close relationship when there are that many more people in the classroom.”

## Make Space

Room arrangement and flow are vital with a large class. Desks in rows may not be the way to go, says Janet Kujat, a kindergarten teacher in Minneapolis for 35 years, where class size gradually has grown. This year she expects a roster of 30 students. Before school begins, Kujat assesses her classroom to make sure there are clear pathways, enough space for pulling out chairs, and options for areas that might get clogged up. “Try being creative and thinking of new ways to arrange the room—maybe an L shape to open up more spaces,” she recommends.

You need to be highly visible to your students. If desks are in groups of four, make sure you are positioned so students don't have to crane their necks to pay attention, says Paul Bovenzi, director of the Professional Development Academy at West Warwick Public Schools in Rhode Island. Also, your desk should be in a central location so students can easily approach you.

In his workshops, Bovenzi suggests simple strategies with room arrangement, such as not putting the trash can or pencil sharpener by the door, where kids are tempted to get up often to throw things away and see if their friends are walking by in the halls.

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**GLOBAL NUMBERS** *What do class sizes look like around the world? The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009) found U.S. class sizes to be higher than in most other industrialized countries.*

19.8

Finland's average class size is low, with world-class results.

21.4

The average primary class size across the world.

23.1

The U.S. number, while relatively low, is on the increase.

31.1

Korea's education system has some of the largest class sizes.

## Establish Ground Rules

Before the real teaching can begin, establish rules and expectations for the classroom—and the rationale behind them, says Hobbs of the AFT. “On day one, involve the children in developing them,” she suggests. “That adds ownership.” Then devote the first three weeks of school to getting the procedures down.

“When you have more students, it’s incumbent on teachers, especially, to have a plan,” says Harry Wong, who runs Teachers.net and is coauthor of *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*. He emphasizes having a classroom-management plan with clear procedures for breaking into groups, collecting papers, and transitioning between activities. Those procedures then must be taught, modeled, and rehearsed to avoid discipline problems, says Wong.

As students enter the classroom, Wong suggests having an agenda posted with a lesson objective and an assignment for students to do immediately. Procedures in a classroom can minimize the walking and talking that cause disruptions in a large class. “Kids want consistency,” says Wong. “They want to know what to expect and what they are going to learn.”

Kujat spends the first few weeks of school having students perfect routines, such as lining up and quieting down. She sets up a pass system for the bathroom, taking girls and then boys in separately to show them how to properly shut the door, flush, and wash their hands.

“You need to make visible your invisible expectations,” she says. “They can’t read your mind. You can’t expect kids to just get it—you have to explain.”

## Forge a Community

With more students in a class, it’s important to create a cooperative culture. That means getting to know your students and having them get to know one another.

Ideally, teachers should do home visits to involve families in their child’s education, says Helen Bain, a teacher, former president of the

National Education Association, and cofounder of HEROS Inc., an organization that conducts research on class size. If this is not feasible because of the size of the class, teachers should at least send home their personal phone number with students and encourage parents to communicate with them. In the classroom, Bain suggests doing activities where the students share information about their siblings, pets, and other interests.

Wong suggests greeting each student at the door by name. Each week, invite a different student to stand with you and help greet fellow students. This can teach important social skills and reduce both discipline problems and bullying.

## Be Prepared

In working with student teachers at Baylor University School of Education in Waco, Texas, Mona Choucair says she makes them time out their lessons to show what will be happening every minute. This is especially important in large classes, yet Choucair acknowledges that teachers need to be flexible as well. “Have an alternative lesson plan in a binder for that day when you don’t feel well or things don’t go right,” she says.

If teachers don’t think outside the box to get kids excited to learn, they will lose them, says Choucair, a senior lecturer in curriculum and instruction. “Take some risks to find things to capture students’ attention.” In a middle school English class, make use of prominent young adult literature, such as the *Twilight* series. Know some basic pop culture facts. “Let them know you understand Lady Gaga...not to be cool, but to say you are trying to understand them,” she says.

With the size of classes ballooning, Prows, of Moreno Valley, California, says she spends an increasing number of hours planning and doing assessments on the weekends. On top of class size, there are diverse learners, the demands of new standards, and cuts in education funding. “We are stretched,” she says. “I really see this taking a toll physically on many of my colleagues.”



## HOW TO SURVIVE THE BIG CLASS

*We asked teachers for their best management tips.*

### ► Divide and Conquer

“Small-group instruction is the way to go. Divide your class into learning cells with structured rotations and daily procedures. It will make for a rigorous learning environment.” —Paige Douglass Ward

### ► Embrace the Chaos

“You have to have a little tolerance in knowing that your classroom will never be quite as quiet, clean, or focused as it was with smaller class sizes.” —Kelly Hom Tyndal

### ► Check Your Attitude

“Keep your attitude in check, because kids can read you! I just made it through a class of 35. Crazy, but I did it, and scores went up!” —Niki Bolze Tilicki

### ► Team Teach

“Team teach with a colleague if you can. I’m lucky enough to be able to do this for parts of the day. I concentrate on checking in with students during these times. Thank goodness for my ‘partners in crime!’” —Renee Bowman

### ► Look for Parent Volunteers

“We use parent volunteers in my class of 36 second graders. I also use small groups and centers.” —Kim MacNaughton Lawrence

# feature | the big class

## Break Into Groups

To manage a large class, assess abilities and learning styles early in the year or use information from the previous year to form focused groups, says Bain. For instance, separate students by reading ability, or pair strong readers with struggling ones. "You are bouncing between groups and using students as helpers," she says.

In a big class, Choucair says, she

worries about the ordinary kids—not those who are gifted or the trouble-makers. When kids are in collaborative working groups, she suggests making sure there is a plan, with a leader and frequent monitoring, to make sure everyone is involved and learning.

Kujat says after testing her students in the fall, she does most of her teaching in small groups while the children rotate to centers. "It's hard to keep

their attention in a large group," she says. "It's in the mini-lessons where a lot of the learning takes place."

In her high school science class in Parker, Colorado, Dorman says her "lifesaving strategy" during labs is to demonstrate the dissection or experiment at her desk to one person from each of several groups. Then, those students go back and instruct their peers. "I can't possibly go from group to group—and it increases the ownership in the learning," she says. "The kids are very capable, and they are able to take on that challenge."

## Rethink Homework

More students often means more grading—but there are only so many hours in the day. "New teachers, especially, think they have to grade everything," says Hobbs of the AFT. Really think about what you want students to get out of homework and if it's necessary to complete 20 math problems or whether five will do. You can also rotate how much feedback you give to each student through the week and sometimes just give a checkmark for completing homework.

To get a quick snapshot of how students are doing, Choucair suggests giving out index cards for kids to write what they learned that day and then collecting them on their way out of class. These "exit cards" can give you a sense of what's working and guide the next day's lesson.

Using student peers as assessors is also a good strategy to save time. But Bovenzi of West Warwick schools in Rhode Island adds that teachers should make sure all students understand the criteria as they review papers—focusing, for instance, in one reading on transitions and in another on punctuation. Rubrics can serve as guides.

Easing up on homework can be difficult, adds Bovenzi. "It's a big mind shift. We give homework because we felt we had to for the longest time." When you free yourself up to give less and make what you assign more meaningful, Bovenzi says, kids can get more out of it—and you can spend more time on the aspects of teaching that matter most! □



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